

# ON STARLINGS



Along with the House Sparrow, the Starling (Sturnus vulgaris) stands rather low in public estimation. Even its Latin name is against it.

In its feeding habits the Starling is entirely beneficial. It scorns most grains but consumes enormous quantities of insect pests and their larvae. When insects are unavailable, Starlings congregate where people live and throw out food for them. Bread scraps they welcome, and if the bread is mixed with fat it is sheer ecstasy to a starling.

Oddly, starlings appear to need a squadron leader. I have often put out food in full view of the starlings watching from nearby trees, and have gone back into the house and looked out a window. Not a move---until the leader came and approached cautiously by his usual route. Instantly the whole flock descended upon the food. Other times the leader was present when I came with the food. He would sit in the cherry tree a few feet away uttering squeaks of anticipation. As soon as I left he would be down getting a few bites before the horde swarmed in. Thus he continued to be a super starling.

Apparently the starlings operate a sentinel system. The moment the local flock swoops down to the food, the sentinels get (and probably give) the message, and starlings--scores of them--zero in like spokes of a wheel.

Never have I seen a starling lift a beak against another starling, or even against a sparrow, a smaller bird. Their motto seems to be "One for all and all for one".

It should be added that starlings are very timorous. Children in the next yard, a vehicle driving in--only a starling knows what causes them to desert food and take refuge in a tree.

In 1890 and 1891, one hundred starlings were brought from the Old World and released in Central Park, New York City. They thrived well and have spread all over the United States and into Canada. Their prolificness is what has made them a nuisance and therefore undesirable. They have up to three broods a year of from five to eight chicks. Because they are so numerous, and are there first, they get the nesting places that we would rather the more desirable songbirds occupied.

Often a very new bird watcher is puzzled. Having seen this dark bird with iridescent feathers and long yellow bill in spring and summer, they wonder about the new speckled bird with the dark bill that they see in the fall and winter. Understandably, they are a bit let down when told it is only a starling.

Starlings are notable bathers--both in water and in snow. On a Christmas Bird Count I once stopped to watch starlings making much ado in an icy puddle. Light fluffy snow brings them joy. One bird will dive in, then the whole flock will be there scuffling up a small snowstorm. Doubtless their habit of close communal roosting makes the washings necessary.

Canadian winters make life difficult for the starling--a permanent resident. They sometimes select unlikely lodging places, for example, the concrete ledge above the second-storey windows of the Telephone Building on Fitzroy Street--and of all places, the northwest corner. Opportunists they are too. Building was going on near here and the board had been nailed unto the foot of the rafters leaving a shelf at the end. The starlings spotted it and roosted there by the dozen. They were soon discovered and excluded. Then they were reading the vacancy ads again.

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